

ELIOTICS

Bernard Sharratt

New Crisis Quarterly

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New Crisis Quarterly
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NEW CRISIS QUARTERLY

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For Terry Eagleton
il miglior fabbro

and because he
didn't much like them

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To the hypocrite lecteur

Whilst every effort has been made to avoid direct infringement of copyright, it may well be found that wherever these poems most recall those of, say, T.S. Eliot, we shall often discover that the most individual parts of his work are those in which other poets have already asserted themselves most memorably. Or words to that effect. Since however it can sometimes seem that the very language itself has now been commercially copyrighted, the cautious reader should proceed without undue recognition.

B.S.E.
April 1st

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The Swan Song of J. Alfred Noble

Let us go then, you and I,
as the sunlight fades across the shanty-towns,
like the lingering ideals of a generation.
Let us go, despite our half-disowned priorities,
the ritual repetition
of faded aims from forgotten demonstrations
or dusty posters recalling by-gone UN resolutions,
slogans that no longer rouse a global indignation
from tired and disappointed sensibilities,
yet still evoke that overwhelming problematic—
Do not sigh, once more, “Whatever for...?”
Let us re-negotiate our resignation.

On the TV screen, familiar politicians smilingly discuss,
debate, prevaricate, procrastinate.

The yellow smog that precipitates the acid rain
the yellow stain that infiltrates the food chain
fired the forests and unfroze the permafrost
poisoned the kids who play in drains
let fall upon the plains the fumes from factories
afflicted oceans and the ozone layer
and seeing that it was the last of times
curled once about the globe and stayed forever.

And indeed there once was time
for the crude oil to flow along the pipe-line
for throbbing petrol engines that clog the streets
there once was time, once upon a time,
to keep the oil wells burning, and the profits.
There once was time for 'energy-saving measures'
and 'reductions in CFE emissions'
once was time for a partial palliation
time for action by united nations
time even for a hundred indecisions
and for a hundred promised deadlines
before the strangling of the planet.

On the screen the experts plead,
pontificate, elucidate and calculate.

And indeed there once was time
to ponder, 'Can we do it?'
Time to turn back and reduce demands
with a mild inconvenience and some small redress
(They would say, 'But why should we be first?')
our central heating, our air-conditioned cars,
our un-recycled rubbish, our un-renewable resources
(They would say: 'Perhaps it's time to make a start.')

Did we dare
preserve the planet—
In a lifetime there has been
a millennium of damage

For we have known it all a long time now, known it all—
have heard predictions warnings maledictions
we have measured all the globe's particulars

we know the species dying, disappearing
'neath the waters, in the skies—
So why did we presume?

And we have seen the signs already, seen them all—
the cyclone and the hurricane, the droughts, the floods,
encroaching desert, shrinking forests, melting ice-caps
eroding cliffs and rising rivers
the record-breaking highs, the unexpected lows
registered in our conscientious tabulations—
So what did we assume?

We have seen the harm already, seen it on the box,
children dying in the umpteenth famine
(preferably in soft-focus, and somewhere over there!)
was it short-term calculation
that made us so remiss
or interest in a debt, stocks that rise and fall—
So what did we assume?

Why didn't we begin?

. . .

Shall I say, I have gone in gloom through darkened cities
and choked on smoke arising from the fires
of year-long forest blazes, continents in conflagration? . . . ,

Or watched white whales gasping on the shores,
dolphins drifting on the scum of dying seas.

. . .

Yet the sunsets still amaze, the skies seem bright and clear
the stars still twinkle, over here.
Sleep-walking, bored, or just indifferent,
lazing on our indoor beaches, or surfing artificial waves,
should we, after the bottled water and the blocking cream,

though we have played and feasted, danced and squandered,
though we have recognised ourselves (now almost sated)
as obese and bloated—

But there's not much mileage, not much fun
in holding back demand, conserving scarce resources
though we have sensed maternal Gaia hold her breath,
and shudder,
and, in short, we should have been afraid

But would it have been worth it, after all,
after all the quotas, annual re-allocations, carbon-trading credits,
investment in solar panels, conversions to wave-power,
would it have been worth while
to have pulled in our belts, with a will,
to have taken a firm grip on desire
to have embraced the entire eco-system with care
to have come back from that brink after all,
if our world was then destroyed in a flash, after all,
or some madman exploded a nuclear war
or wiped us all out with a chemical plague?

And would it have been worth it, after all,
would it have been worth while
after the fine new sunrise, the clean air and clear water,
after the electric trams and the bio-degradable plastic,
all this and so much more—
it's plausible enough to sketch a programme

now we've x-rayed the planet's infrastructure—
would it have been worth while
if dear Mother Nature went her own damned sweet way, after all
and opted to evolve a wholly new species
dismissing us all
as certainly not the last word, at all, at all.

. . . .

—Well, I am not Jeremiah, nor was intending to be.
Am just a single citizen, one that will sometimes try
to sign a petition, write a letter, or two,
vote for occasional Greens, in local elections at least,
perplexed, trying to keep well-informed,
a tiny bit anxious, an ethical shareholder,
full of vagueish values, but a bit confused,
at times, indeed, a mite paranoid,
almost, at times, a prophet, of doom.

I grow worried, I grow concerned,
I will cycle to work from next Monday.

Shall I cut back on meat?
I shall wear natural fibres and pick up litter on the beach.
I have heard the ecologists warning, each after each.
I do not think I can ever do much.
Though I have marvelled at the flying fish and the porpoise
gazed at the awesome glitter of icebergs
smelt the crisp air of the savannah.
We have all seen the great globe in its glory
from astronauts' porthole or through long-distance lenses.
Yet the debris piles up outside, while
normal indifference drives us.
Till we drown.

Post-Millennium

The deep-scarred century died away
with talk of digital damp squibs, and domes.
Millennium.

The unregretted end of dark decades.
And now a rusty hinge creaks
the new door half ajar.
Fresh fears assume their places
with warnings of familiar terrors.
The presses whinge and bleat
of killer cows and asteroid hits
while in a corner of the screen
a clock clicks downwards to the dot.

And then the burning of the catherine wheels.

Millennium came to consciousness
in mildly tepid mode:
a tolerated artificial exultation,
rhetorical speculation
jolting the new dawn's inattentiveness

reciting all those masquerades
immodest optimists rehearse.
One thinks of all the new-born mouths
raising mayhem with their cries
in a million makeshift shelters.

You tossed the sweat-soaked cover from your leaded limbs.
You lay upon the dusty floor. And waited.
You stared, and watched the fierce dawn bring
the thousand thuds of pain
that constitute your now incurable condition.
They throbbed to the rhythm of the ceiling fan.
And when the angry agony erupted
with no relief
and you heard the ambient shrieks and weary groans
you had such a vision of the ward
as the west can scarcely comprehend.
Crawling along the hospital verandah, where
you tried to vomit
clasping in your dying arms
your hungry-bellied daughter.

Our conscience taut against the TV screen
that hides disaster in disasters,
announces new catastrophes
every five or six or nine o'clock
and serious travelled journalists are looking grim
and solemn headlines, eye-witnessings,
are routinising miseries beyond imaginings.
The co-existence of a jagged world
impatient to deny, not mitigate, the worst.
We are sometimes moved by images that squirm
into the mind and scream
the infinitely quiet eyes
of innocently suffering generations.
Turn off the telly, make a cup of tea.
The world confirms its predilections
squandering its billions in designer celebrations.

Journey of the Many

A terrible coming we had of it,
just the worst time of the year
for a journey, and such a dangerous journey,
the borders uncertain and the front-line constantly changing,
the dead all around us.

My sister and I exhausted and crying,
lying down and refusing to budge.

There were times we remembered
our quiet village on the hill, the fields,
and the summers bringing the harvest.

Then road-blocks and patrols, cursing and threatening,
beating and raping, looting what little we had.

And the water running out, and the absence of sleep,
aircraft zooming low and tanks rumbling by,
the minefields without warning and the sudden explosions.

A harsh time we had of it.

When we could, we travelled at night,
keeping hidden, hearing only
the voices within, warning
that this was all futile.

Then, at dawn, we came to the refugee camp,
bare, windswept, a scatter of tents.

But there was water, and a handful of food, every day.

Even a nurse and somewhere to die.

After that, an occasional food truck,
even a camera crew, or an envoy, from somewhere.

But there was no 'long-term provision', and we were 'moved on'
in the end, to nothing more permanent
than this.

That was a long time ago, I remember
the first time, the second, the third.
But tell the world this, tell them this:
we are not at home in this place, even now,
and our village is still in the hands of the others.
We had wanted a settlement, certainly, but not
this 'temporary makeshift'
regarded as lasting for ever.

We had seen much conquest, little justice,
and used to believe they were different.

I crept back to our village, once, years ago,
was arrested, 'deported'—but caught just a glimpse
and the fields are still there.

I fear, now, my daughters may not last
another journey.

Portfolio : La Figmenta

Lay across the frame just off-diagonal—
wrap delirious limbs around the latest model—
flash, flash, the sun-lamp of your smile—
clasp the current product with caressed delight—
partly open moistened mouth and pout
with softened passion in your lidded eyes
but flash, flash the sunshine of your smile.

So I would have you, dear,
so I would have you moan and pant
so they all would have you
as the mind mingles with the *mise-en-scène*
and imagination weaves an old *scénario*.
I should devise
some novel pose incomparably pure-provocative
some pro-position we all can knowingly endorse
obscene and obvious as a fingered thigh or lingering tongue.

She's discontinued now, of course, but through the Autumn Season
still compels consumption many times,
many ways and many places.
Hair over the eyes and lips lewd with promise.
I wonder how we ever got along without it.
We have shaped a pastime, art form, and a product.
Manifold manipulations still arouse
the satiated custom and the bored consumer.

Cybertron

So here am I, decrepit ex-hacker with a dodgy old modem,
surfing what remains of the Internet, browsing for undeliverable e-mails.
I wasn't at M.I.T. in the wave-breaking days
nor at Rank Xerox, or even Atari,
though I once beta-tested
the Amiga Five Thousand.
My machine is almost entirely defunct,
CPU on the blink, cloned Intel,
researched in some start-up in Silicon Valley,
ripped off in Hong Kong, cobbled together in Taiwan.
The hard drive wheezes at startup,
bugs, viruses, crashes, read-and-write-errors.
The sound-card emits barely a whisper,
With internal feedback, wows and continual flutter.
I an old hand,
bored silver-beard amid today's cyber-spaces.

Analogue was converted to digital. 'We want it all digital!'
Routines within sub-routines, unable to exit an infinite loop,
riddled with non-standard code. Yet in the bright time came
the old World Wide Web.

At CERN in Geneva, chat-rooms and bulletin boards,
developing MUDs.
To be transmitted, received, replied to with gusto;
by Mr Gaets, with ceaseless competitiveness,
at Microcon, who schemed all the time to control;
by Steph Job, mourning amid the Apple Mice;

by Huelett & Packhard, with almost a licence
to print money; and old Wantel herself
who got higher and higher on speed, a close grip on the chip.
Bankruptcies brought them all low, in the end.
I have too little memory now,
an old hacker, with a machine almost antique,
and barely intermittent connections.

After such developments, what limits? Think now
communication occurs in convoluted ways, complexities of design
and constraints, gets clogged with redundancy,
swamps us with junk-mail. Think now
communication happens when we least expect it,
but what we decode and interpret leads only to fresh
mis-comprehensions. We hear too late
what we think we needed to know, or if really important
rather less than we thought we knew anyway. We hear too soon
about new innovations, must-haves and marvellous downloads,
until the vapour-ware fails to appear. Think
neither hardware nor software will work. Always increases
in speed demand slicker programs. Newer versions
necessitate extensively modified set-ups.
Complications arise from endlessly incompatible components.

The upgrades and bug-fixes appear every month. Costing the earth.
You think you have reached the state-of-the-art when
you've spent every cent that you've got. You think
you cannot have wasted again such time and such effort
but it's certainly not clear from the help-file
why this refuses to work, ever, with that, or with that, or the other.

I will come clean and say what I think.
I that was so optimistic was so disillusioned,
to lose money in bad bargains, data in defective devices,
I have lost my enthusiasm. Why should I bother to maintain my machine
when what finally works is by then out of date?
Viruses have got at my RAM, my hard drive and backup,
even the Travan.
So how can I expect to access my on-line account anyway?

Hackers with a thousand pieces of pirated software
patch their days in repeated de-bugging,
mangling the code, when the demos exasperate
with save-disabled and time-limited features,
a wilderness of plug-ins and add-ons. So what will the processor do,
crash the program, or let the chip burn itself out?
Turing, Engelbert, Nelson, relegated to Visionaries
in the pioneers pantheon, but not the true Money-Makers, Earth Shakers.
The Internet succumbs in the end to Inter-Act-Vision,
super-highway traduced into digital toll-road, telecom profitable
side-line.

World-wide chat-rooms live on, but only at premium extortionate rates.
Senior Surfer, driven disgruntled off-line
by ad-sponsored websites and commercialised home-pages,
browses old downloads,

disengaged dis-connected explorer
of a long-lost electronic frontier.

The Disappeared

I

We are the shadow men
We are the lost men
Nameless together
Numbers on wristbands
Our dry voices, when
We whisper together
Are fragile and helpless
As spiders on stone
Or rats' bones
In our dungeons

Disappeared without trace or mistrial,
No judgement, no record, no face.

Those who escaped
Into exile
Can list us, if at all,
As possibly dead,
Ghosts of regime change
And rendition.

II

Eyes I do not want to see in dreams
Night terrors
Eyes that do not choose to see
Bloodstains on a broken pillar

A body swinging in air
Screaming I do not want to hear
Beyond pain
And fear beyond imagining
Let me fear no more
Before these shadows

Endure no more
Deliberate devices
Water mask, electrodes crossed,
Toes touching barely
Stained earth
Beyond reach—

And that final
Interrogative encounter

III

This is a cowed land
Not cowardly
Here the stoney faces
Stare on, ignore
The supplication of dead men's
Wives and daughters
Beneath the fading portraits.

Is it not like this
Under other regimes
Waking in fear
In the midnight hour

Trembling in darkness
Dry throat
Forming a prayer

IV

Eyes that are not closed
With despair
Or even defiance
At this last opportunity
This broken dream of a home

In this extremity of exile
We come together
With alien accents
Gathered at the brink of return

Hopeless, unless
Our eyes re-awaken
For others
The constant claim
Of a future
Beyond disappearance
The hope of the lost
Last
 Struggle continues

NATIONAL WASTAGE

by

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excellere aut excheddary

proanachoreisthai thelo

This poem is sponsored by NatWaste Loans Inc.

I. THE BUSINESS OF EDUCATION

April is the busiest for bump, demanding
annual tax returns and interim budgets, drowning us all
in trade-shows, catalogues and conferences,
the hectic swirl of being ‘business-orientated’—
booster courses in management proficiency,
expenditure estimation or personnel control,
the paraphernalia of efficiency,
and quality self-assessment, once again.

Easter dismayed us, coming with research ratings,
like hail against the pane. We opened the envelopes,
concealed our unease, and walked for an hour,
round the corridors, into the old S.C.R.

We got a proper 3a this time, not a 3b, almost a real 4.

Yet when we were students, living in digs,
my supervisor took my mind by surprise
and I was excited. He said, ‘This is new,
this is old, both demanding.’ And off I went,
into the libraries, feeling set free.

I used to read most of the night, then,
and thought it worthwhile.

What are the routes that flourish, what pathways develop,
under this Revised Modular Framework?

Incoming Student, you cannot decide or even guess,
for you are offered only a provisional course combination,
an *ad hoc* composite programme,
and the framework has no rationale, except for

‘recruitment in areas of recognised research potential’
or rich in ‘approved external funding arrangements’.
Turn the pages of your revised undergraduate prospectus,
and I will show you fearful expediency under the rhetoric,
short-sighted managerial aims controlling the hype.
I will show you something different from either
your mind being expanded with pleasure
or your knowledge growing in confidence,
I will show you capitulation, under a debris of promises,
intellectual bankruptcy lurking in balance-sheets of investment.

Play up, play up and play the game

.

‘You made me an offer, a year ago;
you called me an excellent applicant.’
— Yet when I arrived, my eyes bright and my mind alert,
there were no books and the department was closed.
I asked everywhere for a reason, but was told
Nothing, only a silence —
except for a spreadsheet's insistent projections.

*I went down to the Japanese garden,
sat there, and wept.*

Professor Sir Glibsim, distinguished Vice-Chancellor,
took the chair, with a sigh:
‘The agenda before us
is hard, difficult, onerous, yet urgent:
a cut-back of eleven point three per cent, re-adjusted,

effective from this next semester, demanding:
immediate re-structuring, re-redundancy (re-gretable),
maybe occasional voluntary severance,
rapidated retirements, natural what-not, casual savings
and so-on — the unavoidable downsizing, inevitable,
lean and efficient for the up-coming
revised re-assessment re-rating, the HEFC and the TQAA,
the ETDI and an imminent OVXP, to be followed, we assume,
by an inflexible four point one-five in the revised
and re-scheduled Lybrand & Snooper report.
I hand over to Finance, Dr Splatter, for detail.’

‘Literatures (European), Philosophy, Classics,
will close, from October, the first,
though Accounting reports re-deployment potential
(monthly part-time appointment) for one, Theologian, perhaps,
and our new Euro-Languages Unit lacks a French speaker,
or two. Chemistry re-branded, starting today, as Bio-Fuels
(Teaching Division), saving six point one four per cent, overall.
Three Senior Re-Structuring Officers are re-allocated.
The Chair in History & Music & Art is forthwith re-frozen,
as *ditto* in all Social Science (except Law).
On-campus catering is hereby withdrawn on alternate weekdays
in term, and the Medical Centre is offered for sale in the autumn.
Text-messages go forth from today to incoming
Temporary Registered Students, with revised top-up fees and
supplementary residence charges.
These proposals to be discussed by Senate tomorrow,
And approved by full Council the day after.’

Unreal academy.

The crowd flowed out of the conference room,
so cowed, I had not thought defeat
had entered so deeply.
Each man had fixed his gaze upon
the overhead projector,
graphs, and upside-down charts,
and guess-timated percentages,
a visible disimprovement in
overall transferrable skills.

In the three-minute coffee-break
I saw one I thought I knew and hailed him, saying
'Perkins, you who were with me in '68,
has it all come to this, those ideas
we planted, such long years ago? '
'Ah, yes. Quite so. Now in Human Resource Allocation, y'know.
Very fulfilling. Critical task.
Exciting. Opportunities. Opening up.
Giving Next Presentation. Must go.'

You! hypocrite lecteur - mon semblable - mon frere!

II. GAME PLANS

The Chair she sat in, like a high-tech flight-deck,
glimmered in the afterglow, as the screen demure
displayed its flying logo saver
from which an upbeat slogan called attention to itself
(another took its place in Java animation)
advertising on the world wide web her up and coming
Colloquia on Academic Mission Statements, as
her fingers hovered at the keyboard, or gently
stroked the mouse, awaiting nervously suspended calculations:
glancing aside, towards her other monitors,
reflecting mirror-worlds of virtual instant information
encapsulating current cost-centre calibrations
as the day's invoices flowed and ebbed,
cut-price printer cartridges & corporate hospitality expenditures,
overseas conference calls and student hardship fund reductions,
the mild improvement in out-sourced heating costs
and a downturn in part-time teaching overheads,
attributable to sensible forward income-generation:
gigabytes of recurrent committee resolutions
awaiting further referral and devolved decision procedures
prior to preliminary provisional budget allocations—
Above the clear uncluttered desktop was displayed
a print by Rowlandson, the 'Doctor's Dream',
a don asleep, amid a cloud of wingèd books,
Dr. Syntax in a daze of scholarly ambition.

(‘Your Professor of Philosophy sits in his garden
half the day, dozing at our expense.’

‘Perhaps he's doing what he's paid to do. That's Think.’

An old reply, unthinkable today. Unthought.)

A beep, discreet as butler's quiet cough:
more e-mails coming in: her fingers, automatic,
pull the windows down and glide across
the scrolling list of messages unread, a quiet day.
Her on-line Student Access Period has begun,
those monthly queries once again. Another beep:
but this is flagged as triple urgent by her faithful bot:
For Immediate Action, Order This Day.
Yet not the Vice-Chancellor's abrupt demand.
She smiles and clicks, and clicks and smiles:
‘Request: An Interactive Interview for Electronic Journal,
Managerial Interface.’ Acknowledges her consent,
the SAP can wait.

> Yes, our new one-million-pound CAD suite
is highly satisfactory, fashion-industry cutting-edge,
computerising dress-designs in seconds,
accessories included, fully-costed,
with optional arrays of marketing and franchise opportunities.
Indeed a departmental asset.

> The sponsorship was more than welcome, indispensable,
I'd say, while the logos on the students' finished products
assuredly enhance the uni house-brand every way.

> Yes, some Students always grumble, feeling as they do
that the hours of 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. should not be *so* restricted
to contractual commercial partnerships — despite
the fees off-set, the generous work experience they gain,
they want the facility themselves, of course, at times —
but entrepreneurial priorities are *so* un-avoidable these days.

> 'Tis true, indeed, I am, on balance, I do believe,
the first professional Accountant so to be appointed,
Head of a Fine Art Department. That's progress, after all.

When I got the bank-grant, the loan that is, I tried—
I didn't hesitate, I made the application right away,
MOVE ALONG THE LINE PLEASE
now the rent's gone up again, the time-shares are phasing out,
I want to lease a library carrel, with a bunk,
just to get me through to Finals. But I failed, I did,
the M.A. Syndicate has got complete control
and pushed the prices far too high,
and now the Essay Bank is paying less, despite the hours,
I just can't see my way, I'll have to choose.
I've been part-time for six years now
but can't afford the doubled fees, those re-sits wiped me out.
A cool grand each paper, that's a lot.
MOVE ALONG THE LINE PLEASE
'If you can't pay, you'll have to fail,' they said,
'Others have the lolly, if you ain't.'
But if I drop out now, I'll have to pay the fine
and pay back all those weekly benefits as well.

I'm ashamed it's come to this, after all the Family Contributions
(and my Dad's 'de-registered' now as well).

I can't help it any more, I'll have to sell my Grandad's Ph.D.,
It's all he left me, but the market's down these days
in Dante Studies.

MOVE ALONG THE LINE PLEASE

MOVE ALONG THE LINE

I even mailed my Tutor, yes I did—

he had an opening for

a 'Temporary Marking Assistantship, Part II'—

but 'e just e-mailed back: >Why you come to university fer
if yer cudn't afford han eddication?>

MOVE ALONG THE LINE PLEASE

THE LIBRARY IS CLOSING SOON

Any rate, I'm reckoning to go work-shares, again,
me and Lil combined should scrape an overall 2:2, together,
Joint Honours, as they call it now, at half the price.

It's good enough for us.

Good enough for us.

III. RESEARCH AGENDA

The culture's links are broken, the last research students
click and click at the faltering websites. The books
languish on shelves, unlisted. Old Librarians are long departed.
Sweet laptop, hum safely till I conclude my dissertation.
Postgrad cubicles contain no filing cabinets, no A4 folders,
preliminary drafts, scribbled notes, laboriously transcribed
quotations, or other traces of unpractised scholarship.
The scribes are displaced, and with them their allies,
custodians of archival deposits, dis-continued,
have left us no finalised catalogues.
On the steps of the library, I dialled up my modem.
Sweet modem, connect safely till I conclude
my belated Boolean inquiries. Sweet mobile phone,
connect cheaply, for I ring not far nor long.
But from my earpiece in a faint crackle I can hear
my service provider re-route my request, with additional charges.

A virus swept silently through my directory structure,
scrambling irreplaceable Ph.D data
while I was logged on to a dodgy remote FTP site,
on a dull evening down at the cybercafé,
surfing the old old sites, the Library of Congress,
the BL, the V&A, and the National, those once-public utilities,
flickering vestiges of pre-privatised data delivery services,
subs once almost minimal, resources once un-restricted,
and from my back-up files I can sometimes re-activate
relics of global gift-economies, traces of once- co-operative access,

which brought high school kids to Harvard professors,
art enthusiasts to virtual museums, for free!

Oh the internet once seemed such light-years ahead
and its web sites appeared so open to all.

Commercialise! Commercialise!

Advertise!

Pull out its eyes.

So crudely enforced.

Twits.

Virtual Academy.

Across the sponsored fibre-optics of a PFI edu-venture,

Dr Dedication, business entrepreneur, unregistered,

with a laptop chock-full of dubious downloads,

@profit.com, Microserf browser required,

invited us all, in basic on-line chat-mode,

to register as virtual research assistants,

followed by copyright transfer agreements.

At the log-in connection, when the eyes and back

crane downwards to the LCD screen, the human cyborg waits

like a bad modem handshake, dialling and whistling,

I, Netscape the Navigator, though outdated, undecided

persona, on-line surfer with ambivalent gender identity,

can sometimes hack

into the virtual learning environment that brings

the FTE fee-paying unit in line with the profitable service

provider.

The part-time virtual M.Phil, home from MacDoonalds,
logged on at midnight, clears her pile of re-writables,
and launches her pirated word-pad,
installed under Winders, precariously unstable as ever.
On the scanner, at times her printer, are displayed
digital Leonardos, Picassos, Carpaccios and Warhols.
I, Netscope, once browser of leather-bound volumes,
download her drafts and eavesdrop her net-search,
I too access Yoogole and input 'self-portraits' & 'selfies'.
Tome, in latest beta-release, virtual agent with a neural A.I.,
indisposible alternative to books and print-periodicals,
perceives her need and endeavours to address it,
advances his suggestions, a citation here, an index there,
a digital-gallery database with suspect copyright claims.
(And I, Netscoper, have surfed it all before,
accessed on this same info-highway,
I who could once compose a command-line configuration
and even gophered in text mode.)
She downloads one final gigabyte of pix
and logs herself off, all cut and pasted.
After she mails the dissertation to her tutor
(not yet aware of her department's closure)
her tired mind permits one half-elated thought to pass,
'Well, now that's finally submitted, my fees are nearly over.'
When academic institution goes commercial and
narrows down its 'course portfolio'
it smooths the way for private exploitation
and puts a premium on public education.

This policy crept up upon us,
among the pundits, across all parties,
beside the repeated promise of improvement,
the fine-tuning of the loan schemes
with overdrafts or even larger overdrafts for all,
so graduates can pay their graduated tax-backs,
guaranteed to make a chosen
Humanities degree so patently non-profit-making.

The student bets
a safe career
the basic thrift
of public purse
debt fills
the sales
rewards high-income futures
the banks awash
with debt defaulters
higher education
going to the dogs
—or lottery

Sussex and Essex
rating Fours
both places saved!
a golden star
for B&B
allows brisk trade
for conferences and holidays

earns rich reward
South-East Tourist Board
Award
five star
an asterisk
in Egon Ronay Guide

wallet

wallet

‘Plato and Socrates.
Philosophy bores. Aristotle to Ayer
summarily ejected. Aquinas goes in the bin.
Strawson and Quine cleared off the shelves. Yoga is in.’

‘*Antigone* makes way for *StarWars*, and Arts
merges with Ads. After the colleges closed,
all new departments, as promised,
are sponsored. Mine’s a Doc Martins Department of Sports.’

‘Instead of George Eliot,
Racine or Corneille,
the *Chanson de Roland*,
Bert Brecht or *Das Schloss*,
we can expect in the future, with luck,
The Fawltly Towers Catering Handbook
Advanced Hoteliers’ *Manuèl*
— olé! ’

To Canterbrewery then I came . .

budget budget budget

All aboard for the Early Retirement,

All aboard for the early

cuts

IV. DEATH IN HARNESS

Philo the Philologist, a post-Saussurean,
forgot the research ratings, and the sponsored programs
and the balance sheet and ledger.

A garbled hieroglyphic
caught his mind and held it. As he probed and pondered
he missed the stages of promotion, enthused, entranced,
entering oblivion.

Scholar or teacher,
you who turn forgotten pages and look for answers,
consider Philo, who was once securely tenured, as you were.

V. WHAT THE FUNDING COUNCIL SAID

After the harsh appraisal set in stone
after the final verdict in the grim assessment
after the random allocation is completed
the shut-downs and the cut-backs
pruning and prudence and rapid retrenchment
to structures of safe acquiescence,
what was once innovative is now ruled redundant
we who were once keen are now merely demoralised
with a little bitterness

Here is no vision but only resources
resources and no vision and pointless restrictions
retreat to the old disciplinary boundaries
which are borders with decreasing relevance.
If there were genuine developments we might gladly take part
amid these priorities one cannot plan nor think
morale is low and minds are in the dust
if there were even reconsideration of the quality criteria,
frantic publications, repetitive papers, premature findings,
now one can neither wait nor accumulate
there is not even long-term inquiry allowed
but peremptory production demands every year
very few principles survive in this institutional panic
as anxious heads of department jeer and cajole
at desks with bottom drawers still, irresponsibly, unransacked.

If there were vision
and limited resources
if there were no resources
but also vision
even an old vision
an idea
any idea
a policy informing the panic
if there were priorities worth intelligent argument
not the cynical short-term horizon
and the career transfer market
but genuine thought for a future
when passion and precision might be one
and sweet laughing eagle thoughts might grow
where wings have memory of wings,
when children might assume, of right,
gradual time's last gift, a written speech
wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease.
Some hope —
'educate educate educate'

But there is no vision.

Where is the surplus that figures not at all in our budgets?
When we count there are only inputs and outputs
but when we track back among the old student records
there is sometimes an odd sort of supplement we cannot
account for,

elusive, incalculable, a sort of invisible earning,
though we cannot decide how to credit the addition, or not
—yet how can such benefits be somehow intangible?

Where is the protest? Strangled in rage?
Where are the angers of determined rejection?
Who are these frightened timid defenders, jumping through
hoops and looking wildly for goal-posts to shift,
mumbling through last-minute tiny amendments,
adjustments, alignments, corrections, concessions,
allowing an on-going passive betrayal, but minor in key,
limiting the damage, salvaging shards, scooping up fragments

Faltering

Athens Alexandria Bologna
Paris and Oxford
Berlin &
Columbia

A woman threw her long typed thesis out
and organised a sit-in
and kids with burning faces in the CS gas
chanted and beat their feet
and charged head downwards at a line of *flics*
and occupied the *Odéon* and held debates
summoning a generation to a new education.
Voices echo dimly from long-abandoned hopes
and impossible ideals.

On this un-profitable campus, among the shuttered colleges,
under the darkening sky, the light reflects
a broken laboratory window, and the silent library
looms as a shadow, deserted, devoid,
emptied of books, terminals now disconnected.

Old thoughts can teach no-one—

Yet only a fool can accept that—
as the child cries in the rain
demanding a knowledge
we cannot
refuse to deliver.

sunset flames in the panes, a new burning

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

You're not kidding!

Shanty?

Pass-Notes for *National Wastage*

Not only the title but the mood and much of the incidental feeling of the piece were prompted by an anonymous document, entitled *University Planning 1997-2007* (henceforth *UP*). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, the document will elucidate the details of the piece much better than you might imagine. I will recommend it (apart from the symptomatic interest of the document itself) to any who think a humane education worth the trouble of preserving. Some passages are quoted below, as appropriate.

To another work we are all indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly. I mean Krapp and Cowflop's *Concise Higher Education Acronyms Table* (2001 edition, third revised printing). Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognise certain echoes of burial practices.

The epigraphs are taken respectively from the lapidary motto of one of our more highly sponsored university foundations (colloquially rendered, 'Pull it out or get out', with a subtle echo of the main sponsor's own smiling slogan) and the reply of the Sybil, recorded by Polonius, when asked if she wanted to take early retirement. The otherwise unrecorded Middle Voice seems apt. The first page of *UP* echoes her sentiment: 'A resource (e.g. space or staff) has to have another use or a disposal mechanism'.

Line 36: *Play up*. Regrettably, copyright fees are now too high to allow further quotation.

Line 41: *no books*. In line with the recommendation on page 9 of *UP*: 'As areas [Philosophy, Classics, etc] are abandoned, . . . old library holdings in these areas should be removed over time to provide more student places.' See *The Lament of the Assistant Librarians*, lines 316ff below.

Line 45: *Japanese garden*. One local lecturers' union is rumoured to have unfairly singled out expenditure on a new Japanese garden beneath the windows of the Vice-Chancellorial suite as a suitable option for alternative cost-cutting. The story is plainly apocryphal.

Line 58: Extensive explanations of these noble acronyms are to be found in the ever-reliable *CHEAT*. See also *UP*, pages 1 to end, *passim*.

Line 61: *Lybrand & Snooper*, once strongly tipped as future franchise holders of the South-East Universities Consortium Teaching Licence.

Lines 64-69: The details are perhaps taken too prosaically from *UP* but the imaginative incisiveness of the original formulations is truly irresistible to anyone of a poetic disposition.

Line 90: The first appearance of Netscope the Navigator, later to figure in the virtual M.Phil episode. It is Netscope's random memory which serves to unify the whole work. The on-line help-file is worth consulting for those with access to the interactive version.

Line 92: Perkins is clearly a mythical figure, though representing a multitude.

Line 121: *Rowlandson print*: Published by Ackerman in 1816.

Line 124f: The *Recumbent Philosopher Dialogue*, between an irate taxpayer and a supportive vice-chancellor, clearly dates from a period considerably before the modern era, and is perhaps only a fond legend.

Line 151ff: The original interview can be found on-line at <http://www.valley.girls>

Line 164: Library carrels equipped with bunks are an innovation worthy of widespread adoption. See page 7 of *UP*: 'We hope to have resulting spare space for rent to outsiders or students.'

Line 193: *half the price*: Each candidate sharing the jointly awarded degree pays only one quarter the normal rate, an extremely generous special offer in these straitened times. Additional discounts are also available for groups of five or more.

Line 224: An obvious misquotation from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Part-Time Undergraduate*.

Line 259: *command line [interface], gopher in text mode*: Signs of Netscape's ancient magic powers, now defunct.

Lines 373-378: This passage incorporates phrases from W. B. Yeats, 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation', a poem which is the subject of a 70,000-word critical commentary by the author, who is hysterically seeking publication of this monograph in time for the next Research Assessment Exercise. Also available, a cut-price collection of essays (some recent) and a slightly rushed case study, 'Images of Incompetence in a Contemporary Campus Environment'. Interested publishers are urged to make contact directly.

Line 423: *Shanty*? The poignant final cadence conjures up, of course, the once civilised commencement of all supervisions with an offer of sherry, since downmarketed to the less acceptable shandy. There is perhaps just a hint of even harsher conditions to come.

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FORE WORKS

—but there is no competition —
There is only the fight
(T.S. Eliot)

par-odos: the way forward and the way back
are never the same twice
(Caliban, *Dictionnaire*)

LEARNT TORSIONS

I

The history that is past and the history that is present
Will together, we presume, determine the history to come
And those histories are always before us.
For to be fixed in a permanent present
Is only a dead repetition, a fatal denial.
What might be and what can be
Are not merely some slight thought in advance
But practical, difficult, delicate paces before us.
What might be and what could be
Stem from determined decisions, from more than decision.
The calls of the dying stretch out at us
From brick walls trickling with blood,
Moments of misery, outrage and upsurge, courage defeated,
Efforts that failed. Such calls
Break on us still.

Though to what effect
Stirring the pages in the autumn study -
A slight breeze on the brow?

Other places
Are vivid now, in deep lines of the mind,
Bitter times, but perhaps less blind and bitter
Than now: flags flying red

With the colour of blood, hoisted on walls
And high places, in cities beleaguered and dying,
Paris and Munich, Madrid, Prague and Turin,
The last achings of hope, and the first
Breeze of the future, light in cracked panes
And flames reaching higher, desires demanding to win.
We hear their defiance, muffled in cross-fire,
And the dead look like debts, awaiting redemption,
Promises drawn on ourselves:
A cart upended on cobbles, a rifle
Wrapped round with a rag, an arm clutching at air,
Stiff and drained white in the gutter,
A street silent and heavy with thunder.
These images amaze
Yet the pictures move in familiar ways
And the fingers clench, slowly, in pain
As the gaze moves on to the next:
A photo from Belsen, maybe a painting by Goya,
A map of some ruins, with radii dotted in ink.
Then the book is closed, and the heart is hopelessly empty.
No, says the mind, for the garden is lovely,
Peaceful and calm in the sun.
No! says the mind, for we cannot assign
The future, our future, to this.
What has been and what might be,
What others have done and might well do again
Impose one demand which is always insistent.

II

Guards and sappers in the mud
Dot the fields of Flanders;
The chilling in the blood
Freezes corpses in the trenches
Anticipating snipers' targets;
Fumbling fingers dropping rifles
As the bugle blows the dawn;
Barbed wire fences and the bullets
Tear the flesh of stumbling figures
In the gas-dark maze of morning;
And the shrieking and the dying
Drowned in whining of the shells
Bursting in the glare of rockets
And the choking at the throats -
As the generals peruse their menus.

At that peculiar moment, in those burning years, neither victory
nor defeat
Neither for nor against; at that particular time, when the chance
came,
But neither opportunism nor plot, and not at all a compromise,
When sudden decisions were taken. Neither foreseen nor
unexpected,
Neither gamble nor design. Except for that one chance, a strange
and single instant,
There would be no change, and there has always been change.

We can only be ready, but we cannot say *when*,
And we cannot predict, nor determine, for that is dictation
Across unwritten pages of a history not yet fully deciphered:
The curious conjuncture of pressures and passion,
 the implosion of feeling
And the limits of patience, yet shaped every time
By the force of events, a pattern beyond us,
An instance beneath our control —
Yet not wholly anarchic; both a history made
And a history given, grasped
In the effort of partial intelligence,
Random in the impact of deep-buried tension.
So the chaining of the future to a hopeless past,
Implied in the weary reformist gesture,
Maintains a desperate, fragile, distortion
Which only endures for so long.

Present demands and future perspectives
Leave but a tiny, diminishing space
For crucial decisions made under pressure;
But only after such risky adventure
Can the marvellous heave of the future be felt,
A gap opening up in the world,
A moment of promise, a promise of moments to follow.
An exhilaration of time in the end.

III

These are only disaffected elements, we are told,
Time and again, with a sneer:
Neither significant contributors
To the noble art of the feasible,
Labouring at margins of change,
Accretions of slow and patient amends,
Nor total rejection, disdain
Of all consequence, commitment beyond
Personal rapture or gain.
Neither reform nor revolt. Only a hardened
Tenacious grasp on the throat
Of structures, committees, campaigns and petitions,
Working like others, but concealing their aims,
Rabid fanatics with no comprehension
Of forms and conventions, of channels of protest,
Of ways of getting things done.
A slime on the face of compassion,
Again and again, we are told.
Selective protesters,
Picking our targets with care,
Ignoring the benefits, anxious to slur:
Cyprus and Aden, Oman and Belfast,
Racism, sexism, profit, corruption -
Why don't we go, and live over there?

Examine it slowly,
Look closely, with care: anger is there
But held in a grip like despair;

Desperate sorrow, torture and fear,
Repression, betrayal, oppression are near.
Who partakes of the profit,
Who lives in the clear, who gains from the pain?
Those who impose and those who oppose
Are both caught in the coils
And twist in the net,
Two sides of the knife. As knots tighten
And lungs constrict, the need erupts in us all:
To grasp hold of the knife, and cut our way clear

IV

The Thirties and Forties have deadened desires,
The Trials and the Camps have denuded our hopes;
The Long March awaits its new recruits
And the ships set forth for a silent coast,
Returning alone.

Will ever
The Sierra act again as our host, with banners unfurling
As middle-aged men in easy suits recall the bright days
of their youth
And a thousand flourishing rifles are raised high in salute,
No longer in anger and pain?

Rhetoric moves, compassion moves,
 Only for a time: what revives as emotion
 Dies as refrain; of the momentary horror
 Very little remains. Only by action, organised action,
 Can changes be made and rendered secure.
 This we all know—
 From the structures we live in,
 Not only the buildings, designed and constructed,
 But also the settled companies that built them,
 Whether guilds or trades unions, banks or community trusts,
 The hundreds of bricks or the mechanised belt,
 The Cotswold village or the urban freeway—all are built,
 As revolutions are built, from the ground. People are strained,
 Crack, and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, resign,
 Retire with uncertainties, cannot sustain the pace.
 But some will not give in. Mocking voices,
 Complacent and satisfied, or merely in genuine ignorance,
 Constantly yap at them. The builder in a waste land
 Is most despised by those who believe in a mirage,
 The whining complaint of the nearly privileged,
 The loud disclaimer of the already secure.

The details are obviously and always difficult,
 As in the endless debates of the Central Committee.
 Strategic choices are, of course, indispensable,
 But not in themselves any guarantee of success:

The party, the leadership, are only a focus
For massive demands, for deeply embedded desires;
Tireless and disinterested, maybe,
But always replaceable
When caught in the cages of power,
Of personal kudos or dithering timidity.
Sudden, in a moment like madness,
While papers are still being shuffled,
Arises that incredible confident power
Of people demanding control—
And changing the forms of control for ever.
Marvellous the moments that matter
In a history yet to be made.

LEAST WORKER

I

Our births decide, to a large extent, our lives. In this society,
People live, and die, under exploitation, under employment,
Are bought and sold, retired, made 'redundant'. In their place
Is a new machine, or a cheaper worker, or an untrained migrant.
Old skills to new technologies, old products to new commodities,
Old needs to fresh investments, and every demand is turned into
Profit. Which is always means, aim and end,
Control over man and woman, pleasures and necessity.
People live and die, with a time fixed for working
And fixed times for leisure, time allocated
By the slow clicking of the factory clock,
By the endless murmuring of the TV programme,
A time bought and shaped by precarious weekly wage-slips.

Others' births dictate, to a large extent, our lives.

—How the few live

Affects us all, leaving still that deep inheritance
Of guarded, privileged, power, hidden from sight
Behind high walls around pleasant estates in the country
Or cased in deep vaults under imposing banks in the City,
Effective in quiet conversational boardrooms
Or in deep-carpeted offices, smelling of wealth.
At the subdued afternoon meeting
Calmly decisions are taken, by well-fed, satisfied minds,

And millions are shunted like empty trains
To wait for the next rich investor.

In that ageing factory
If one does not go too close, if one need not get too close,
On the late afternoon shift, one can almost bear the broiling heat
Of the vivid furnace and the roaring rollers
To watch molten metal sliding into moulds
And workers stripped, swearing and sweating,
Struggling in the lurid light and aching fumes,
A dangerous, back-tearing job:
Two by two, in joint operations,
Grappling long soft lines of smelted steel
To be twisted and turned into tubes. Again and again
to the furnace,
Arms raised against the flames and eyes searing in glare,
Viciously tired but with weary precision,
Curling white-hot snakes with clumsy asbestos paws,
Burnt palms and hardened fingers moving with practised skill
In guarded gestures long since learnt in that daily dance
With savage scorching injury. Keeping a rhythm,
The rhythm of the presses, the rhythm of the pressures,
The enormous pounding pressures of monstrous moving machinery,
The constant production and the continuous shifts,
The constant danger and the continuous exhaustion,
The repeated rhythm of afternoons, mornings and nights,
The endless alternation of shifts. Bodies ageing and aching.
Working and working. Injuries and death.

Night ends, and another day
Prepares for heat or quietness.
In a silent boardroom the night-cleaner
Empties the ashtrays and flowers. I am here,
Or there, or elsewhere. Thanks to my birth.

II

'I wonder what the late shift is doing
With this sudden disturbance at the gates,
This loud rejection of the rates—
This rude insubordination on the floor—
This unprecedented hammering at my door!
Such total and determined solidarity
We've never had to face before!
Now thunderous acclamation, thunderous applause,
Greets every new outrageous clause
Proclaimed by rabid union negotiators
Outlining quite utopian realignments
Of the firm's basic governing agreements
Covering every aspect of employment —
They really want control and seem prepared to take it!!
Intend to run my factory for themselves,
Their friends and neighbours,
Producing things for use and not for profit!!!
Good God! Now they're breaking down my office!'

That was always a way of putting it—not very convincing,
A rhetorical flourish from a worn-out historical mould,
Leaving one still with the intractable problem
Of tactics and strategy. The pageantry does not matter.
It certainly won't be (I'll say it again) quite what one expected.
What then is the value of the long-pored over,
Long-argued about, finely-footnoted research into
Those previous revolutionary models? Have they misled us,
Or even misled themselves, those endlessly-detailed movements,
Leaving us only some paradigms of partial disaster?
Was their confidence only a misplaced commitment,
Their rational optimism only a product of bankrupt analysis,
Useless in these very different conditions we find ourselves facing
Or perhaps even try to ignore? There is, it must seem to us now,
At best only some limited lessons
To be drawn from any such previous experiment.
The theory imposes a practice, and is modified,
For the practice has to be changed every time,
And every historical breakthrough is a new
And unforeseeable conjuncture
Of uneven developments. We can only fully predict
What has, as a matter of research, already happened.
At every conjecture, not only that crucial conjuncture,
But in all its developments, in every contradictory occasion,
On the edge of all possibilities, there can be no definitive future,
Though always the menace of memories, the threat of some
Terrible precedent, risking our own generation.

We cannot rely on
The pattern of past events only,
But rather their precise specificity,
Their very uniqueness, that peculiar unrepeatability
Of what we call history, or revolution, or tragedy.
The only confidence we can hope to acquire
Is the confidence of actual practice: and practice makes possible.

The ageing fingers firmly bend around the steel.

The chapped hands move calmly through the flame.

III

O hard, hard, hard. We all find it hard, of course,
The grinding daily routine, weary day after weary day,
The captains of industry, merchant bankers, newspaper editors,
The gentlemanly rulers, statesmen and speculators,
Distinguished civil servants, holders of many directorships,
Military controllers and TV pundits, all find it hard
To Make Ends Meet, even to Turn an Honest Penny,
After Tax, in the Office, down in the City, on the Exchange,
And slender the returns and gone the incentive.
And we all moan with them, after the terrible Budget,
Or the IMF conditions: though there is always someone to blame.
They say, in the press, be moderate, and work very much harder
For that will be in the National Interest. And when, on the telly,
The interviewers await, for the Prime Minister to appear,

With a grim frown in the eyes and barely restrained anger
under the voice,
Then we know that the union militants, that same ubiquitous band,
(And with them the interests of millions) are about to be blamed
once again—
Or when, on the front page, the headlines loom larger in red
And the daily ignorance is fed once again with the lies
and with silence,
And the facile analysis deepens into frothing hysteria,
Leaving only an empty wail of reaction;
Or when, on the radio, the News offers again the same
stale old distortions —
Then we are told, be patient, and work without strikes
For strikes are always the wrong way to proceed;
work without pay-rises
For pay-rises will just bring inflation; there are still
productivity-bonuses
But the pay and the products and even the work may well go
to others.
So work without power, for you are not ready for power.
Being moderate will bring us prosperity, though prosperity
Will somehow bring unemployment as well.
Long queues at the Labour Exchange, but excitement
on the Stock Exchange.
A means test for school milk, but an increase in dividends.
A rise in prescription charges, but a pay-rise for the police —
All perfectly obvious, and no longer requiring analysis:
It's the usual
Crisis continuing.

You will say I am mouthing
Familiar *marxisant* platitudes. Do I need to say them again?
Do you need to hear them again?
In order to defend what we've got,
To keep what we've fought for,
To have what we made in the first place,
 We must take what was ours at the start.
In order to make what we need,
 We now need to make what nobody needs.
In order to dispossess those who never produce
 We must produce for those who never possess.
In order to wholly become what we all can become
 We must endure what no-one can wholly become.
For what you are constantly told is the most basic of lies,
And what you can easily make is what you do not yet have,
And what you can become is only
What you are prevented from being.

IV

'The militant striker tests the deal
That keeps him working overtime;
Behind the laundered balance-sheet the real
Division of necessary labour-time
Perpetuates the capitalist pantomime

In which the only profits are our losses
If we obey this system's rules
Whose constant care is for the bosses
Not for those who wield the tools;
Such tame obedience leaves us fools.

The whole industrial product should, by right,
Go to those who give it use;
But for that we'll have to fight
Since to save his private golden goose
Any boss will gladly draw the noose!

Slaughtering the guy who makes the goods
Seems a futile, stupid action.
But the deadly lesson that these hoods
Have learnt with dirty satisfaction
Is how to smash a militant fraction -

So the whole work-force must make it plain,
Each of us must have the resolution,
Not to live and work for private gain;
We know the ultimate solution
Is either death —or what we call a Revolution!’

V

So here we are, perhaps half-way there,
 having tried twenty times already,
Twenty attempts partly successful,
 the efforts of previous workers,
From Diggers to Sans-culottes and Chartists, and every revolt
Builds on the others but is a different kind of advance,
Since we can only consolidate facets of freedom
While a system remains that denies us the whole

And those facets can soon be absorbed. So each further effort
Demands its peculiar tactic, its shift in perspective,
Though the ultimate aim remains stubbornly the same
In the elusive continuity of struggle, the repeated trajectory
Of classes in conflict. And what we manage to gain
Through solidarity and strength, has often been hoped for
By others, who died long before,
By men and by women whom we cannot
Redeem—for their suffering is over—
Though their aims and their words we can echo
In slogans their ghosts might applaud, though spoken
Under conditions they could not foresee.
And perhaps neither our phrases nor actions
Will really outlast us, like theirs.
For us, as for them, perhaps it's the trying that matters.

A hope is what one builds from. As history lengthens
The problems seem more intractable, the prospect more clouded
Of possible, actual. Not the local insurrection
Surrounded, with a long pause for development,
But a global reaction to every conjuncture
And not one reaction only but an endless variety
Re-shaping all other conjunctures,
re-making the global occasion.
Here then is a time for hesitation, as rifles are cocked,
But also a time for instant decision, as bombers take off
(A time to end all time, this time).

Sudden revolts can strangle themselves
When only the here and the now matter.
But revolutions are strangled at birth
When the here and the now matter no longer.
We must acknowledge that now and yet we are here
In a deeper perplexity, more desperate entanglements,
As a whole globe turns in our view
While the endless cries fill the air-waves in millions,
A world's hunger lapping loud in the silence of space,
A flicker of pain in the dark.
Our lives have already, in part,
Decided our ends.

THREE VALUES

I

I was never quite sure what work is, but I know that work
Is an odd kind of action, often unwelcome, or unavoidable,
Yet enjoyable to some degree—once just a day-to-day chore,
A matter of getting things done, of simple survival;
Then, only somebody's day-job, defined by employers.
As merely employment, the actual work is often forgotten
By those who claim to provide it; ever, however,
 a matter of energy expended,
Requiring materials and skill, demanding, accumulative —
All that we actually make for ourselves, and for others.
Under-valued, by those who think they determine 'employment'.
But work is, as ever, a making and learning,
And learning again from the making:
The toy tool-box in the garden shed, or the kiddie's tea-cups,
The floury fingers or the soily knees
The smell of pastry and the rasping saw
The jigsaw puzzle and the knitting pattern.

Work is within us, and all around,
In the bricklayer's wall, the carpenter's door,
The motorway macadam or the harvested fields,
Hedgerow and ploughlines, pigsty and stable,
The hi-fi design or the vacuum cleaner,

The streetlights, railway tracks, mobile phones, TV monitors;
The night porter and the candlestick maker,
The exotic performer and the lollipop lady,
Near-sighted jeweller and long-distance haulier.
Engrained in old furniture, dissolved in terrains,
Work has many forms, many skills and many descriptions.
The hand is on the tiller. The eye is on the child.
Manual work and mental labour may impose different demands,
Though often combined: the nurse's care on the pulse,
The building surveyor's carefully-weighted decisions,
The designer's flair or the lathe-turner's precision,
The scholar's hunched concentration or the vet's deliberate incision,
Are all work, just as much as the heaving effort
Ramming home or the light touch raising a soufflé,
And all take their time, take their toll,
A time accrued and exhausted, gaining and groaning,
A time older than the time of retirement gold watches, older
Than the time of factory clocks, time-sheets, or overtime,
Costed by accountants, recorded and measured by managers
Anxious to unpack and dissect every motion and minute
To streamline and automate everyday actions.
Between the night-shift and dawn-rotas,
When work is done in a dream,
Before getting the kids off to school and setting the ironing aside
When work is over for the week and the weekend chores begin,
This, in all of its senses,
Is work
Still to be done.

II

Where is there an end to it, the backbreaking toil,
the daily destruction of muscle and sinew,
the sweating and aching and wearing and tearing,
where is there an end to this wreckage of strength,
the grind of bone upon bone, the unpayable
price of exhausting the whole?

There seems no end but addition: the clacking
calculation of figures and tables,
while the soul shrinks to the size of a ledger,
long years of delivering short-term accounts
while dreams of promotion fade into fantasy
indulged in while clearing the desk yet again.

There once was a simple, so-called, revolution,
of jenny and coal-mine and new forms of power,
collective concentration that seemed to be progress,
factory and mill and massive machinery,
new working rhythms under continual pressure
the pounding of steam-piston and hammer.

Now a new 'revolution', with terminals humming
in paper-less offices where spread-sheets command.
We cannot now think without pervasive computers
or work on production-lines not governed by robots,
nor even project any future not likely
to seem merely more of the same, but much faster.

We have to acknowledge the current foundations,
the wheeling and dealing, as the Stock Exchange flutters
and national currencies come under attack, stocks
float and sink, wiping out pensions and savings
yet making a profit for some, by-passing controls,
interests de-regulated, a gamble for gain.

There is no control over it, the free speculation,
no end to the risking of crises for others,
the hoarding of notional assets, electronic, invisible,
the laundered loot and the insider knowledge,
the personal prospering and social disaster,
the incalculable, un-realizable, costs of ravaging capital.

It seems, as one becomes clearer,
That work has another dimension, and ceases to be just a job,
Or mere not-unemployment: the latter a peculiar notion
Enshrined in one-sided views of economy, which become,
In the populist slogans, a means of blaming the victim.
The meaning of work—not the slender weekly wage-pocket,
Generous salary, appropriate remuneration, steady promotion,
Or even daily identity,
But the implementation of something worthwhile —
We can output a product even if useless,
And beginning with use restores the value to work
In a different way, beyond any value
Derived from just being paid.

We were aware of this once,
That the work embodied in things we use from the past
Is not just a momentary monetary matter
But a genuine accretion, of wealth —not ignoring
That aspect which is perhaps more subjective:
The satisfaction of handing on also to others,
As others to ourselves, the half-conscious sense
Of being connected, of making one's own contribution.
We come to discover that the moments of effort
(Whether or not due to an un-equal system —
We accepted the task, to be paid, or because
Somebody told us) add up to a permanence
With such permanence as continuing use can contain.
We may feel this more often
In the work of past masters and makers,
Now enhancing our lives, even while our own
Seem held in the grip of exchange,
But the labour of others remains as a gift,
Achievements marked out by irreplaceable skills.
Jobs change and prices rise and fall; but the real asset remains.
Work the destroyer is also work the creator,
Like the cities once built from the desert,
The bitter toil and high-built wall
And the irrigation wrested from the banks of the river,
The spring flood and the annual sowing,
A lasting magnificence may survive to the present,
A monument of strength and of power
To visit in awe: but for all those lost lives
And their pain, it was always but work in the sand.

III

I often wonder if that is what Sraffa was after,
unlike other economists — or another way
of measuring the same:
that the toil of the past produces a continuous present
we can always trace back to the past that has made it,
so the work of our days incorporates previous workings
of people no longer here to be paid—or exploited.
We cannot see it clearly, but one thing's for sure:
most work does not disappear —
or the equation no longer balances.

When the great work begins, and the resources are all allocated,
raw labour and skills, materials, and organised energies,
(and those who invested their cash have removed from the scene)
these forces combine, from product to product,
re-cycling all elements, components, and inputs,
the same product, in sum, totalling no more
than the overall input, the investment of all.

Yet the outcome is still not the same as the in-come
or the value derived from the process,
so the total adds up, rather oddly, to far more than itself.

On that bottom-line, of familiar accounting,
assigning all costs and the various prices,
you cannot assume that 'the work is concluded'
or 'only the market now counts'.

At the selling-point, whether fruit-stall or shopping mall,
is always a voice proclaiming (though often in accents
unknown to economists, and hardly in pure mathematics):
'Genuine bargains! Unrepeatable offers!
This isn't just a one-off exceptional saving,
a seasonal loss-leader special. Here, between
the price I'm asking and what I'm prepared to pay,
while this offer remains on the table, consider how
well-off we can *both* prove to be, at this extra-ordinary price,
neither cheap nor expensive, but fair exchange and no theft;
you agree, surely, to this: however you juggle the sums,
this deal has got to be good for us both,
whether selling or buying—that's the one standard deal
(whether that standard is gold, conch-shells, or paper)
which makes the whole market work for us all—
so I'm not just acting as con-man: So sell your work here!
—then buy your work there! Either way, I'd say it's a bargain! '

O sellers and buyers, beware of such prattle:
you who come with goods, and you whose purses and lives
will suffer the inroads and expenses of buying,
what if the only good you can sell is your labour itself?

So Marx, when he tried to make sense
of the value of working our time.
Not free market mechanics
but exchange always unequal.

IV

Gold's glitter now is dead
in family vaults at the bank,
bloody child of avarice and ancient stocks,
shrewdness and slow time,
interred —
foundation sacrifice
for our paper edifice
still directing the interest
of our sterling civilisation.

V

To crew a lifeboat, raise a child, or cook,
observe the behaviour of a sea-bird,
commentate a cricket-match, play golf, or ski,
diagnose a minor ailment, pursue a long career in politics,
or expose high-placed corruption, advance the truth
by scholarship, or lab work, disclose the unexpected
by painting, archaeological dig, or stand-up comic turn,
to garden, paint the house, put up a shelf,
collect stamps, or fines, or contributions — all these are
forms of work or labour, and always will be,
some of them when there is time only
after the day's other work or a lifetime's hard endeavour,
whether as casual hobby or vocation solemnly followed.

We often make work for ourselves
and find our value in that. But to disentangle
the degree of interaction of the valueless
with value, is not a job for the market,
no job at all, but something we must learn
and express, in the work we enjoy,
can give ourselves to, with no other demand.

For most of us, there is only the snatched
moment, the moments of work after work,
the garden-shed, the light glancing at evening,
the allotment patch, or the garage bench,
the sewing-machine, or music played so intensely
that it is not work at all but you are the work
you are playing. These moments are work as relaxation,
from work, after work, while normal work remains
routine and distraction, a strain and a chore.

The work half-grasped at, the labour half-lost, is fulfilment.
Here the impossible union
of kinds of value is actual:
here our worth and our work
are working together
where labour is otherwise imposition
of that which is only demanded, for a price,
and has little worth in itself,
driven by market forces, by profit.

And true work is freedom
from supply and demand only.
We call it a gift, perhaps even a present.
For most of the time, this seems a pursuit
we may follow only in our own time,
since most of the time our time is not ours,
is bought and is sold by others, as their time.

Though we might be content, even fulfilled,
if our work satisfied that permanent need
(a process involving the needs of all others)
for a life of meaningful toil.

THE OLD RED HOUSE

I

Mid-life crisis seems a ludicrous condition,
commonly predictable yet often unexpected
be-calmed between torpor and trepidation,
when the short life seems shortest, and youth compacts with age.
Brief energies vibrate the ailing heart, at home or work,
as diminished vigour sounds the body's early warning,
repeating in the morning mirror
a murmuring refrain, disdained by early afternoon,
though self-projections more absurd than dreams of adolescence
revive the flagging spirit: no final prospect looms,
just intricate ambition, denying diminution of capacity.
Between apprenticeship and pension
the work's demands accumulate. No major cataclysm,
nor magnificent *debâcle*, but steady measured time recedes—
yet not a welcome measure. And now the countenance
is framed with permanent flecks of grey or white,
a blossom more melancholic than a fading suntan,
but neither distinguished senator nor ancient prophet,
merely a problem for the fashion magazines.

Where went that summer now, the unrecallable
ridiculous days of youth?

When you too come this way
taking the steps you are likely to take,
following the pattern you are likely to repeat,
when you too have come this way, finding the days
beginning to stretch, with voluntary pastimes, hobbies,
community service —
hoping it may not, after all, be the same for the rest of the
journey —
if you come with dismay, admitting your failure,
if you come with pride, proclaiming your prizes,
it will be the same dilemma, when you leave the previous
pathway
and turn the corner to the declining slope
and the new horizon. And what you thought you had lived for
is as achieved as it will be, a matter of record,
for which the rationale remains, if at all,
only in converging lines of perspective.
Perhaps to no purpose at all, or a purpose beyond you,
exceeding, or not, expectation. There were, of course,
other options
which would have led you here also, some adventure,
or far distant travel, a new profession, or an old affair.
But this is how you actually came, to this here and this now.

Since you will have come this way
taking all choices, starting from all the beginnings,
at almost any age, or in any condition,
it might seem much the same: you have to postpone both
second childhood and rejuvenation.

You are not here, it would seem, to survive,
enrich yourself, or idle away the days to come
or gossip those that are done. You are here, you must think,
for some good
reason for being. And reasons are more
than a pat formulation, or existential decision,
gesture of commitment, or reiteration of favoured identity.

And what a lifetime had no time for, while living it,
a lifetime cannot tell you: the moments of decision were tinged
with revision, undermining reassurances of self-recognition.

Here, the interaction of purpose and pointlessness
is apparent. Or not. Platitudes in a penal colony.

II

Memos in a filing cabinet,
e-mails in an archived folder,
dusty records in the cupboard
stored away in perpetuity
trace the contours of careers
docketed and documented,
registered and classified,
commemorated and forgotten

Anniversaries or birthday cards,
Valentines and invitations,
scribbled love-notes, *billets-doux*,
tearful protestations,

recriminatory exchanges,
marriage licences and passport applications,
mortgage bills and alimony claims
regretted or revived

Homework drafts and school reports,
Class-photos, teacher's comments,
examination papers,
lecture notes and assessment profiles,
degree results, professional diplomas,
proficiency portfolios,
technical prerequisites,
achieved or over-estimated

In the brief pause before the manic rush-hour
near the ending of the daily shift
before the repetition of recurrence
After the dull train with crowded passengers
had passed the routine stations
and the taxis stalled at traffic-lights
Through the subway where the crowd disgorged
between three tubes where commuters crushed
I met one wandering, neither busking nor bemused,
As if drifting towards me like a dreamer
before the urban pressures undismayed
and as I focussed on the full-formed figure
That guarded half-acknowledgement we offer
office colleagues and estranged acquaintance
I caught the sudden shape of several mentors

Whom I had read, admired, but half-refused
both then and now: the beard and mane,
the eyebrows and the forehead, alert investigators
Both cultural and dialectical, political and practical.
So I assumed a *simpliste* role, and murmured
and heard so many murmuring, 'Are *you* still here?'
As though we'd never parted. I played the sceptic still
remembering my youth but being now some other,
and he a face still smiling: yet my words
Propelled the arguments they anticipated.
And so, deferring to the old tradition,
too wary of the present for presumption,
In collusion at this anachronistic re-assumption
of argumentative discussion, a fuller give-and-take,
we had black coffees at a sidewalk kiosk.

I said: 'You must admit it's failed.
Yet failure was predictable. Therefore, concede.
You may not wriggle out, may not deny.'
And he: 'I am not eager to recite
my thoughts and theories which you have tossed aside.
These things have been perverted. Let them be.
So with the current vogues for thought. They will be forgotten
by the future, as I expect it will forget
both good and bad in me. In the last analysis (he smiled)
The disappointed optimist can blame the party or the program
Last time's manifesto belongs to last time's opportunity
and next time's situation demands a new perspective.

But, as the present seems directionless,
to the activist now disgruntled and despondent
between two camps converging with each other
So I find the need to reaffirm
the principles I never thought could be ignored again
when I laboured at my writings in the old BM.
Since our cause was just and justice compelled us
to grasp the contradictions of the whole
and urged the mind to analyse and diagnose
Let me remind you of the terms we offered
to set conditions right for our future generations.
First, to repudiate the premise
That everything worthwhile can be derived
from money, interest, dividend, investment,
pure unproductive profit.
Next, that those who make the difference
between the sums in-put and the final product
can make a different kind of difference if they will.
Last, that decisions in a democratic mode
are distorted by disproportionate division,
distribution not alone of wealth or power.
But complex formulations, organising grasp,
the party can supply, at some peril to itself.
and, if it succeeds, rightly so, to others.
We make mistakes, we must, accustomed to the old controls.
From '17 to '89, we tried, with much distortion,
some success.
You really think the aftermath more sane?'

The lights were going down. In the grim storm
he left me, looking back in time,
wings folded against the hurricane.

III

There are three alternatives,
which may be presented as much the same
yet lead to different consequences,
starting from identical conditions:
commitment to wealth-creation, for the always-already rich;
provision of welfare-programs, for the permanently poor;
and, nestling uneasily between them, some minor re-distribution,
which, however modestly begun, puts the watchdogs
of the *status quo*
upon their mettle. Theirs is the use of public media,
privately possessed,
to counter change —not opposing every marginal improvement,
but any actual reversal of exploitation, any emerging tendency
for the future to redress the past. Thus, a wealth tax
may be proposed
as a mere inheritance percentage, tiny, hardly noticeable,
but even that must soon be rendered ineffectual, intolerable —
though never un-symbolic.

History need not remain a servitude.
But history can be re-adjusted, once again.

So, the lords and ladies vanish,
and if the baronets, why not the banker-billionaires,
the oil companies, or the war-lords of today, in arms and drugs?
Yet their wealth remains inviolate, rooted in a wide division,
a persisting zero-sum.
And all manner of ways can be found—

If I think of Marx and of Morris,
as individuals not wholly admirable,
with their usual human inadequacies,
but far better at thinking than most,
and producing undeniable insights,
while maintaining traditions of life-time commitment;
if I think of a Luxembourg drowned in black water,
of Lenin or Trotsky or Gramsci, in prison as well as in power,
or of one who died strapped to a chair in Mountjoy,
and of those multitudes who died, killed, and were killed,
caught in the continuing logic of conflict,
why should we demonise
their lost endeavours more than their enemies,
who can hardly claim to have done better
considering the global reach of their power
and the persistent horrors over which they preside?
We may not follow their strategies,
we may not mimic their methods,
or march under their flag flying high.
But these, and those who opposed them,
and those over whose future they fought,
have accepted the inexorable verdict of history
and have gone, unredeemed, into their time.

Whatever we allow for the vanquishers
we cannot deny to the defeated.

Whatever we say to the contrary,
comparing catastrophe with cataclysm,
as though they were options,
everything is still left us to aim for,
everything still to be done
in what time remains as our own.

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IV

The beggar still lives on the footbridge,
street kids garrotted in slums,
shacks swept away in the monsoon,
fingers scrabbling for seed in the sand,
dossers in down-town derelict shops.

Yet a well-built mansion for three,
a fox-hunting country plantation.

What makes such a difference? Not 'Nature ',
old alibi we allow to ourselves,
the excuse we bring to our table.
'History' *is* that shrug of our shoulders,
not some power beyond all control.

We make the conjuncture
We claim is just human nature.

What we call a home may be only a shed, a canvas sheet,
but to make a home is to build a society.

A home is where we start from, any place
and shelter that is right (where a child is at home,
taking its place in the support of others,
a child neither cowed nor exploited
but held in a love between others and self,
the common start in life though not without exception,
the usual human commitment, however overwhelming,
though never without pressure or failure)
and any home, hut, cave or ram-shackle shelter,
is a step along the way, to firm identity, flexible person,
or broken division. That is where we start.

We are always in debt to those who precede,
the elders, those who provided our own pre-conditions.
Yet, never too soon, we are those elders ourselves,
becoming the conditions for others' beginnings.

The moment of inheritance and that of the final bequest
seem almost contiguous. A generation without alteration
would terminate history, since history is not mere perpetuity
but inevitable difference. So, while this time expires,
whether deliberately or in indifference, in every decision
we make or evade,
history is the home we build.

Both the inconceivable future and the direct known descendant.

So, we may opt for relaxation or exploration
yet the common ground of all our exertion or in-action
may easily be over-looked, ignored or denied,
as if our identity came from ourselves.
We stand, so they say, on shoulders of pigmies and giants
who could never have imagined our times or our lives,
any more than we can envisage a thousand years hence.
The longest light curves over horizons,
the oldest utterance recedes past recovery.
Yet the unbroken genesis of children continues,
no mystery, but inscribed in our common humanity,
visible in shared features and family resemblance,
networks of kinship on a dizzying scale, a mingling of millions
(un-chosen ancestors, descendants defeating
imposed demarcations)
intricate cross-connections, un-acknowledged affinities
(involving not less than the whole human genome)
and all of us receive and transmit, beyond choice or desire,
our selective addition, genetic, material, ideas, and decisions,
the flick of a leaf, the trace in the ground.
A pattern of chaos, it seems, yet still constituting
the whole single planet as home to us all.

*

Afterwords

These ‘poems’ are line-by-line re-renderings based upon Eliot’s work. Some were first written in 1984 and two were published in my *The Literary Labyrinth*. Various others have emerged over the years.

They can be regarded as examples of the Renaissance practice of *imitatio* of a revered classical text. Perhaps also as instances of Situationist political *détournement*. And even as merely ironic Oulipo exercises.

Or as simply succumbing to that established temptation of irreverently rewriting a small body of poems which has deeply but ambivalently influenced several generations of readers who once knew them almost by heart. I trust my current readership will at least recognise which poems are reworked.

This edition includes one additional exercise, based on Eliot’s *Coriolan* poems, and prompted by Donald Trump in 2017, and revised in 2025.

Trumpal March

Fake News. *Tweet. Tweet.* Stop the Steal. *Tweet. Tweet.* Me. Me.

Over the airways, along the digital cables, through the manipulated media mania.

First the boasts. Then the trumpeting. And the lies, so many lies.

How many? Beyond count. That's what I'm telling you. The phoney press.

You knew it already, admit.

Yet we hardly knew what we had done, that day, or knew the Capitol of old.

This is the way to the Hill, they said, and we followed, so many, dazed & dis-believing.

So many marching, how many marching? What? Did it matter, on such a day?

And is it still happening? Yes! And yet - you could hear the lies coming apart, already.

Now the bullying, the whining, the whingeing.

The banal life of democracy is a bare consensus. So sad!

So we wait with our smartphones and comfort food.

What's to be first? Can we even guess? Or count? Is it

800 luxury hotels

42 golf courses

120 failed companies

A few thousand festering tenements.

I cannot say how many millions in bank loans, tax scams, evasions, and

50 crony billionaires

100,000 climate deniers

120,000 energy corporations

250,000 small arms retailers

Five hundred major arms manufacturers

A few hundred thousand financial lobbyists. And the lawyers.

Phew, that took a long time. Is it Him now? Not yet.

But those are the Donors, then the Citizens United,

The Dark Money making its appearance at last.

And here are the Tax Havens and dodgy Trade Deals. Look! Look!

There! he's finally arrived. Look.

There is no compassion in the mouth

Or grace in the tiny hands, grasping & groping

And the cold eyes, peering, hating, glaring, indifferent.

But what is lurking under the hair, concealed in that large-breasted suit,

Beneath the glitter and bling, behind the tasteless façade,

The new fulcrum of a world going insane. Or blind.

And now they proceed to the *dénouement*. The Catastrophe.

Here comes a Miss Universe, bearing the fate of the planet

In a dust bowl. Dust in the air, suspended.

And the Fire Next Time. The Flood.

Fake news, fake tweets, fake boasts and delusions, post-truths

Clogging the channels.

Is that all we can say? How few golden eagles! How many last trumpets!

(And on Labor Day, we couldn't get to the food bank,
So we took young Donald III to the shelter. When they made the announcement.
And he whispered, almost aloud, *That's it then!*)
Don't throw away that covid-mask.
It'll last for a bit. An elastoplast. Please, can you
Give us a light?
Any light?
Not even a rainbow?
But the military are forming a Guard of Honor. You're kidding!!
That's it then? A bang *and* a whimper?

The history that is past and the history that is present.
Let us go then, you and I. Again . . .

To the hypocrite lecteur:

Whilst every effort has been made to avoid direct infringement of copyright, it may well be found that wherever these poems most recall those of, say, T. S. Eliot, we shall often discover that the most individual parts of his work are those in which other poets have already asserted themselves most memorably.

Or words to that effect.

Since, however, it can sometimes seem that the very language itself has now been commercially copyrighted, the cautious reader should proceed without undue recognition.

Praise for Sharratt's previous work (but not this one!) :
an absolutely important first-rate book - Terry Eagleton
I am honoured by Sharratt's attention - Seamus Heaney
fascinating, entertaining, .. very impressive - David Lodge
the most richly-packed book by an English critic
in recent years - Nicholas Tredell
astonishing, powerful, playful, brilliantly clever
and attractive - Fred Inglis

*New Crisis Quarterly revives the title
of a short-lived periodical which
published only reviews of wholly
imaginary works, which their fictive authors
did not have the time to write.
NCQ books are offered in the same spirit.*